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Having crawled out on a political limb, leaders of the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) apparently are willing let themselves—and millions of riders—get sawed off rather than admit they don't know much about how to make friends.

That's the real news in Thursday's statements by CTA President Frank Kruesi and Chairwoman Carole Brown that they will go forward with plans for a 20% service cut rather than rethink their hard-ball negotiating style or consider other options.

Mr. Kruesi started the ball rolling downhill a few weeks ago, when he insisted that, if the CTA couldn't get a fast \$88-million bailout from the state, its only choice would be to take a meat axe to its service.

But that strategy was bad from the beginning.

First, the CTA wanted action in the General Assembly's November veto session. The session lasts only six days, leaving little time to negotiate complicated deals.

Even worse, while Mr. Kruesi and Ms. Brown kept publicly saying that they wanted the legislature to boost the subsidy to both the CTA and suburban-focused Metra, the suburban rail operator, they made it clear the CTA wouldn't squawk if the money came from Metra.

Top suburban Republicans like U.S. House Speaker Dennis Hastert and U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk took that as a threat, and moved to retaliate. In recent weeks, the congressional pair sent increasingly pointed messages that what Springfield Democrats giveth Washington Republicans can taketh away.

The predictable result is that the whole question of operating assistance for the CTA or anyone else has been kicked over to the legislature's spring session. Then, a compromise tied into more money for Downstate and suburban roads is possible—if Mr. Kruesi can quit throwing spitballs that only yield spitballs back.

In the meantime, the CTA now has limited options to close a \$78-million hole in its proposed 2005 budget. None is very palatable, but some are better than others.

One option is do nothing, pass an unbalanced budget, and hope for the best in the spring. Risky, and quite possibly illegal.

Another option is to shift some funds from capital projects to operations, boost or restructure fares, and make some judicious cuts. That would balance the budget while giving the CTA some time to negotiate a deal in Springfield that draws bipartisan backing.

Option three is to go ahead with Draconian cuts, cuts whose severity the typical Chicagoan has no idea are just a vote away. Cuts like ending overnight L service, lopping off dozens of bus routes, and sharply boosting wait times as winter begins on virtually every remaining bus and train route in town.

Mr. Kruesi and Ms. Brown say the cuts also could be called off if they receive "adequate assurance" that more money definitely will come their way from the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) now or from the General Assembly in the spring. But the RTA says it doesn't have any money to give. And increased state aid almost certainly would require a sales tax hike, an unlikely prospect if Gov. "No New Taxes" Blagojevich stays in office.

The final call will be made by Mayor Richard M. Daley. He's the one who's going to have to live with the political reaction when Chicagoans, particularly inner-city minorities, figure out how much their service will be cut. And he's the one who ultimately will have to decide whether the CTA's current negotiating team is getting the job done.

Mr. Daley has a lot on his plate at the moment. Mr. Kruesi and crew just piled on one more

thing.